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The Sabbath in the Greek

Use and Meaning of "Sabbaton"

THE Sabbath question is before the world. Men can not cry it down. Over that question Christendom is divided into three different classes: Observers of the first day, believing it to be sacred; observers of the seventh day, according to the plain letter of the Bible; those who believe in no Sabbath, but generally observe the first day of the week.

Observers of the first day present various arguments to prove its sacredness and obligation. Many of these men frankly concede that there is no scripture proof of its sacredness other than inference and questionable example. If it could be shown from the New Testament that the first day is called the Sabbath by inspiration, it would be good evidence to show that it is a divine institution, and that its observance as such rests upon moral obligation.

If we turn to the English versions of the Scriptures, we find nothing which even appears to recognize the first day of the septenary cycle as the Sabbath. Presumably, this should be conclusive; for the New Testament was translated by learned and devout Christian men, who were, generally speaking, all first-day observers. But they render quite uniformly all the passages where that day is referred to. Yet there are those who contend that Matt. 28:1 in the Greek clearly teaches that the first day is the Sabbath.

Below we give the Greek of that passage, a transliteration into English, and a word for word translation into English:

“Ὁψὲ δὲ σαββάτων, τῇ ἐπιφωσκούσῃ εἰς μίαν σαββάτων.”

“*Opse de sabbatōn, * tē epiphōskousē eis mian sabbatōn.*”

“Late but of the Sabbath, it beginning to dawn into the first of the week.”

A Modern Rendering

This passage is rendered by some first-day advocates, “At the end of Sabbaths as it began to dawn toward the first of the Sabbaths.” It is held that the first Sabbath (Greek *Sabbaton*) refers to the seventh-day Sabbath, while the last expression *mian sabbatōn* means “the first of the Sabbaths,” or the first day of the week. Is this true? Let us examine the terms and text.

1. The word *sabbaton* is the Greek form of the Hebrew word *shabbath*.

2. That word was used not only to designate the last day of the week, but the whole weekly cycle as well, because the week owes its origin and continued existence to the Sabbath alone. Therefore as the Sabbath marked the crowning day of the week, it was the most natural thing to call the “sabbatical period” by the same name. This the Hebrews did. Therefore the Greek lexicons, of Liddell and Scott, Greenfield, Nestle and Weidner, Bagster, Robinson, Pickering, etc., give as one of the definitions of the Greek word “a week,” period of seven days. So also Gesenius defines *shabbath* in one of his definitions, as “week.” Lightfoot, in a comment on Matt. 28:1 says:

“The Jews reckon the days of the week thus: One day (or the first day) of the Sabbath, Two (or second day) of the Sabbath [etc.] . . . Ezra or-

dained that they should read the Law publicly on the second and fifth days of the Sabbath, etc.," meaning, of course, the second and fifth days of the week.

The Schaff-Herzog "Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge," article "Week," says:

"The Greeks and Romans first became acquainted with the seven-day week through Christianity and the scattered Jews. [The Romans adopted it after the reign of Theodosius.] The expression *hebdomas* is not found in the New Testament, but rather *sabbaton* (e. g., Luke 18:12) or *sabbata* (e. g., Matt. 28:1), used, however, in the sense of it [*hebdomas*], as, in the Old Testament, *shabbath* [sabbath], is parallel with *shabua* [week] (cf. Lev. 23:15; Deut. 16:9)."

3. The use of the word elsewhere in the New Testament clearly shows that one of its distinctive meaning is "week." See Luke 18:12, where the Pharisee boasts that he fasts "twice in the week" (*sabbaton*). It would be absurd to say, I fast twice on a Sabbath day.

4. But why may we not render Matt. 28:1, *eis mian sabbatōn*, "the first of the sabbaths"?—Because the construction of the Greek forbids it. Of nouns in the Greek, the gender, number, and relationship must be shown. These points are determined by the cases, of which there are five,—nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, and vocative. And all these particulars are indicated by a change in the form, or in the termination of the words. The subject of a finite verb, is, of course, put in the nominative case. If the relationship is such as would be denoted in English by the word "of," the noun would change its form to the genitive case. Thus, what we would call in English "the man's book," would be in Greek, literally, "the book of the man," the word "man" being put in the genitive case. Adjectives must agree

with their nouns in gender, number, and case; and these particulars are indicated in adjectives, the same as in nouns, by a change in the form or termination of the word. The word *sabbaton* is used in the New Testament both in the singular and the plural, the plural signifying generally the same as the singular. It has a plural signification only in Acts 17:2, where it refers to a number of sabbaths; and in Col. 2:16, where it refers to the seven yearly or ceremonial sabbaths of the Jewish system. The word *sabbaton* is of the neuter gender.

Reasons for the Common Rendering

Having noted well these facts, let us mark their application in the expression "first day of the week," as found in the eight passages in the New Testament: Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:2, 9; Luke 24:1; John 20:1, 19; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2. The construction of each of these passages is exactly the same; and hence the explanation of one will be the explanation of them all. As the first instance is that of Matt. 28:1, we will take that as the sample. But the query may arise, If *sabbatōn* in the first instance is rendered "Sabbath," referring to the seventh day, why should the same word, in the same form, in the second instance, be rendered "week," referring to all the seven days? The reason is that the word in the last instance is preceded by the numeral adjective *mian*; and the lexicons tell us that *always* when the word *sabbaton* follows such adjectives, it means week, the adjective specifying the day of the week, as the first, second, etc. Thus it is easily and absolutely determined when to render the word *sabbaton* "Sabbath," and when "week." Whenever it is preceded by a numeral adjective, as it is in all the eight texts above referred to, it means "week."

But why should the word "day" be supplied, making the passage read "first day of the week"? —It is because the numeral adjective *mian* is there, and it must agree with some noun either expressed or understood: But there is no such noun expressed; therefore we must search to see what noun can be understood. Let us then examine this numeral adjective, *mian*. It is from the first of the *cardinal* numbers, *heis* meaning "one," but here, by a Hebraism, used for the ordinal "*first*."

We here present the word in its different genders, and follow its declension till we find the form before us. Adjectives are declined like nouns:

	Masculine gender.	Feminine gender.	Neuter gender.
Nominative case,	εἷς (<i>heis</i>),	μία (<i>mia</i>),	ἓν (<i>hen</i>).
Genitive "	ένός (<i>henos</i>),	μίας (<i>mias</i>),	ένός (<i>henos</i>).
Dative "	ένί (<i>heni</i>),	μῇ (<i>mia</i>),	ένί (<i>heni</i>).
Accusative "	ένα (<i>hena</i>),	μίαν (<i>mian</i>),	έν (<i>hen</i>).

We here find the form, *mian*, for which we are seeking. It is in the feminine gender, singular number, and accusative case. In the sentence (page 2) it is the object after the preposition *eis*. There must be some *noun* in the same *gender*, *number*, and *case*, with which it agrees. Why may it not agree with *sabbatōn*, and be rendered "first sabbath," referring to Sunday, as the novice claims?—Because *sabbatōn* is in the *neuter* gender, *plural* number in this instance, and *genitive* case. There is not a single point of agreement. Neither can the word "sabbath" be supplied, so as to make it read "the first (sabbath) of (a new series of) sabbaths," as they again contend; for *mian* and *sabbatōn* do not agree in a single point. Nor can they render it "the first of the sabbath," referring to Sunday, or any other single

day; for that would be nonsense. What is expressed is "first of the week;" but whenever a division of the week is spoken of, it must refer to its days. "Day" is therefore the word to be supplied. The Greek for day is *hemera*, a noun of the *feminine* gender; and we have but to put it in the *singular* number and *accusative* case, which would be *hemeran*, to make the agreement between it and *mian* complete. Then we have *eis mian (hemeran) sabbatōn*, "to [or toward] the first (day) of the week"—as definite an expression as language can form.

The words, *opse de* (page 2), translated in the common version "in the end," do not signify that one class of sabbaths (the seventh day) there came to an end, opening the way for another class of sabbaths (the first day) to be introduced, as some would have us believe. The word *opse* is an adverb, meaning, literally, "late;" but it is a word which the Greeks used with reference to that which *was past*. See all the lexicons with their quotations from classical Greek. Thus, "late of the day," or "on the day," signified, "when the day was *past*," "late of the Sabbath," "when the Sabbath was *past*."

Testimony of Scholars

We present in the same line the candid treatment of this disputed text by Dr. Walter Quincy Scott, one of the instructors in the Bible Teachers' Training-School of New York City, and an observer of the first day of the week. In the January (1905) number of *The Bible Record*, published by the training-school, there appeared the following question:

"Is it allowable to translate the Greek of Matt. 28:1, 'At the end of the Sabbaths, as it began to dawn towards the first of the Sabbaths'?"

In reply to this question, Dr. Scott addressed the

following letter to Dr. W. W. White, the editor of *The Bible Record*:

"My dear Dr. White: "NEW YORK, Sept. 8, 1904.

"Your correspondent asks, 'Is it allowable to translate the Greek of Matt. 28:1 [the Greek text is here inserted], 'At the end of the Sabbaths, as it began to dawn towards the first of the Sabbaths'?'"

"Such a rendering is impossible.

"1. *Mian* is feminine, and *sabbaton* is neuter. *Mian* agrees with *hemeran* understood.

"Your inquirer remarks on this point (as made by writer in *Sunday School Times*), 'Neither do they [*mian* and *sabbaton*] agree in number.' Of course not; a substantive followed by a partitive genitive can not agree with it numerically.

"2. It seems idle to add anything to the foregoing grammatical prohibition of the rendering proposed. But I may add that *mian sabbatōn* is a Hebraism corresponding to the rabbinical designation of the days of the week. They called each day of the festal week a 'Sabbath,' and indicated each day by its proper ordinal prefixed to 'Sabbath.'

"And in Greek *eis* is commonly used (as here) instead of *protos*.

"LXX and N. T. alike use *ta Sabbata* in sense of singular — 'the Sabbath day,' and also in the meaning 'week.' *Mian sabbatōn* in Matt. 28:1 can not mean anything else than 'first day of the week.' The R. V. correctly translates the verse.

"Your correspondent will find ample scholarly notes in Lange's Matthew, by Schaff.

"Yours very truly,

"Walter Quincy Scott."

In the May number of the *Record* there appeared another letter upon this subject, from which we take the following:

"Editor of *The Bible Record*."

"Dear Sir:

"The query in the issue of January, 1905, as to 'Sabbath or Sabbaths' seems to call for further warning. The querist asks if in Matt. 28:1, *Opse de sabbatōn, te epiphoskouse eis mian sabbatōn*, may not be rendered: At the end of the [Jewish seventh-day] Sabbaths, as it began to dawn toward the first of the [Christian first-day] Sabbaths. The superb negative answer given should be heralded far and wide.

People of excellent intention and deep piety, but *with little knowledge*, are making such an interpretation in fortifying themselves against 'Saturday-keepers.' I own two books, and have read two others, in which each writer claims to have made the great discovery of said translation, and has based his book thereon.

"These good men had only a *rusted smattering of classical Greek*, and in their zeal without knowledge they stumbled upon this rendering, with a carelessness that few students of a month would make. 'A little learning is a dangerous thing.' And more than that, acquaintance with classical Greek is not enough for the reading of the New Testament Greek. One must have large acquaintance with the grammar and lexicon of the Greek Old Testament, and behind that, as the key to many of its peculiarities and mysteries, of the Hebrew Old Testament also."

This letter is written by a professor in a theological seminary, but his name is not given.

No person of acknowledged scholarship is ever found claiming as a just criticism on the Greek construction, that Sunday is called the Sabbath in the Greek; and the criticism herein set forth would not be demanded did not some theological novice, taking counsel of his ignorance, occasionally put forth the claim, and thus confuse the minds of those not acquainted with the Greek. It is hoped that this explanation will be sufficient to show such teachers the folly of their course; or, if this may not be, that it will enable every English reader to see why he should reject the groundless claim, and to know for himself that Sunday is never called the Sabbath in the New Testament, either in the English or the Greek. To take the position it is, is to set aside the meaning of the Hebrew terms for more than two millenniums; is to ignore the testimony of the Syriac and Latin versions; is to charge all the learned translators of the Greek New Testament into English with unpardonable ignorance or dishonesty. Our readers may safely rely upon our English versions.